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ABSTRACT

In the past, the process of education was one of training--the learner was encouraged to follow the ways of priests, parents, professors, and patriarchs. This system works well as long as two conditions exist: if there are few modifications in the society and if people remain in the same place. Increasingly, the opposite conditions are true: few, if any, places are escaping rapid changes, and fewer people live out their lives in their birthplaces. These new conditions create new human needs, one of which is the development of better prediction of future developments and preferences. Individuals also need to encounter culturally different views, so that they are reminded that viewpoints are cultural rather than natural and that potential beliefs and behavior are not limited to original cultural inheritance. Learning about and from other peoples and cultures will increase knowledge and awareness, and complement individual and general insights. Individuals need to become their own teachers and continue the process of self-education. No content can serve this purpose better than cultural studies. Through involvement and purposeful study, individuals can be helped to develop desirable qualities of empathy, humility, humor, respect, gratitude, honor, puzzlement, and an overall sense of what it is to be human. (JD)

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BECOMING SELF-EDUCATING AND CULTURE-CREATING BY BEING EDUCATED TRANS-CULTURALLY

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BECOMING SELF-EDUCATING AND CULTURE-CREATING BY BEING EDUCATED TRANS-CULTURALLY

Seymour Fersh

Each person is unique and, at the same time, similar to all the other eighty billion human beings who have ever lived on this planet. It is as if each one stood at his or her own crossroad: one path leads back into human history--perhaps as long as two million years, of which 4,000 is represented by written record--and the other path connects each with contemporaries--over four billion and increasing by almost 75 million each year.

Until recently, for most people of the world, it really didn't matter if understanding stopped at national boundaries, if indeed it stretched that far beyond family and clan. In such tradition-directed societies, the major function of homes and schools has been to pass along from teacher to student the accumulated wisdom of a particular, shared culture. It was appropriate for teachers to master a body of knowledge and to help train others who could benefit from such a reservoir of valuable know-what and know-how. The student was trained to "take his place in society" and encouraged to become ethnocentric--to believe that his or her homeland, people, language, way of life were not only special but also superior to that of others. In many ways, the ethnocentric view is helpful if a person spends all of his or her life in one relatively unchanging culture. This kind of schooling is still appropriate where there are few changes and the elders know best the kind of behavior that is most likely to be effective for survival and fulfillment. Until recently, this condition was true for most of the world's people and, to some degree, for many Americans as well.

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Today, conditions are changing rapidly; moreover, the condition of change itself is changing--there is more of it and at an accelerating rate. In today's world of growing interdependence among nations and peoples, we need to increase our awareness of how our national actions and interests affect others, and are affected in turn.

Increasingly we will also have to become more self-educating and self-directing. In this kind of condition, we will obviously need to know more about new kinds of content but, in addition, we will need to develop the capacity to learn from the world as well as about it. The contribution that learning about other peoples and cultures can make to American students will be revealed not only by their increased knowledge and awareness of them, but also by their complementary insights into themselves and all humankind. Students will not only know, they will also perceive, feel, appreciate, and realize. Through involvement and purposeful study, they can be helped to develop desirable qualities of empathy, self-development, humility, respect, gratitude, humor, puzzlement, and an over-all sense of what it is to be human.

Perceived in these ways, international studies can also help us prepare for living in societies that do not yet exist. Unlike other living beings who have little control over their environment, humans can now to an increasing degree determine in advance the kinds of environments they prefer. In fact, people must develop more foresight because our technology increasingly creates situations--physical and psychological--for which we must be prepared. Through the process of learning from and about other cultures--not only what they have done but why and how they responded to particular conditions--we can improve our capacity to create new responses to new opportunities.

Humans must learn to participate more effectively and affectively in making their own collective and individual history in advance by working for

preferred futures. This shift in what students will need to do means that teachers must help them become cuture-creators as well as receivers of cultural heritages. The values of traditions and of the past will be less directly useable as a prologue because history is less likely to repeat itself since technology is transforming the world in which each generation is nourished. During the past century, the speed of human travel has increased by 100 times, the power of energy by 1,000 times, the power of weapons by one million times, and the speed of communications by ten million times.

Moreover, an awareness of international cultural differences can alert us to cultural (ethnic) differences within our country. National boundaries may encompass geographic areas but they do not necessarily (nor should they) convert all people within a country to the same cultural value system. In the United States, for example, there is still a rich heritage of ethnic variations which started and continues with our immigrants. To speak of some of these groups as being "culturally disadvantaged" is to commit the same error which assumes that some other nations which do not share our cultural values are "backward," "emerging," and "underdeveloped."

In a similar way an awareness of cultural differences can be applied not only to those who inhabit "foreign areas," but also to those living in "foreign times." In the United States especially, technology changes living conditions so rapidly that each generation lives in ways dramatically different from those of its predecessors. American parents and their children have been experiencing a "cultural gap" as well as a "generation gap"--there are differences not only in age but also in language, dress, music, folkways, and mores. Moreover, each of us is increasingly experiencing our own "cultural reincarnations"--we do not live for a lifetime in the same cultures into which we were born nor in which we will die. One no longer has to change one's place

to change cultures; even if you stay in the same place, the same place does not stay in the same place culturally. You now become an "immigrant" without migrating.

An additional benefit of cultural studies for the individual is the enrichment of one's life. What would our standard of living be like if we had no knowledge of what was created in Europe--its arts, literature, languages, sciences, religious and philosophic thought, and more? Isn't it equally possible that we are culturally deprived if we do not share in the possibilities of enrichment from the world's people who live elsewhere?

Anyone whose life is restricted to knowledge only of his or her own country does not share in the birthright as a member of the world community. For Americans, however, the loss is more than personal. It can be a loss for people in all parts of the world because we through our government and world trade are involving ourselves in the affairs of others. What we don't know about different peoples and cultures can hurt them. Because our help is offered in a humanitarian spirit, we too often assume that the results will be beneficial. The claim of good intention is not, however, an acceptable excuse for ill-formed or ill-conceived actions. If we are to help others, we must first help ourselves by understanding the nature of cultural assumptions.

As human beings become aware of their relatedness, they need not necessarily cease being ethnocentric. When a person begins to identify with a nation, he does not cease being a member of his immediate family; he learns to apportion and extend his loyalities. Ethnocentricism is important and useful because it helps a person to develop a local culture pattern that is appropriate for specific conditions. It would be unfortunate if the richness of cultural variety were lost to us. In learning about other cultures, the objective is not to discover a "universal culture" suitable for all people, in all

places, and for all times. Rather, the objective is to learn the lesson that Aldous Huxley described following his first around-the-world trip in 1926:

> So the journey is over and I am back again, richer by much experience and poorer by many exploded convictions, many perished certainties. For convictions and certainties are too often the concomitants of ignorance....[1]

A person's awareness of his own ethnocentricity does not mean that he therefore must consider all cultures equally acceptable to him. Awareness can, however, help an observer to realize that what he "sees" is largely already "behind his eyes." Marshall McLuhan says, "Our need today is, culturally, the same as the scientist's who seeks to become aware of the bias of the instruments of research in order to correct that bias." A similar warning comes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "When researchers reach the end of their analysis, they cannot tell with any certainty whether the structure they have made is the essence of the matter they are studying, or the reflection of their own thought."

Today, humankind is living in a world where groups are becoming more and more interrelated, less and less isolated. Ignorance of others is <u>not</u> bliss and what you don't know <u>can</u> hurt you. Moreover, many inventions and styles of life created by individual groups can help others. Each culture does not have to reinvent the wheel or depend exclusively on its own scientists, philosophers, and artists. Learning about other cultures is not something done as a favor to the people who live in them--as an expression of goodwill. Such knowledge can be of immediate and profound benefit and pleasure to the learner.

We should, in the words of James Thurber, "not look back in anger or look forward in fear but look around in awareness." It is too late for us to be unprejudiced, but we can recognize and become alert to our condition. The unprejudiced mind is not without prejudices; it is, says Hans Selye, "a mentality

that has control over its numerous prejudices and is always willing to reconsider them in the fact of contrary evidence."

For example, in the United States the currently popular way of dividing the world is in terms of Western and non-Western cultures. In the so-called non-Western parts of the globe are people as different from each other as Chinese, Indians, Nigerians, Egyptians, and Iranians. But these differences are minimized or, more often, overlooked or ignored. In a similar way, all the people who were living in the Americas when Columbus landed were identified by the Europeans as "Indians." The so-called Indians never thought of themselves as one people but considered themselves, more correctly, to be Iroquois, Hopi, Aztecs, Incas, and other tribal groups.

The major purpose, therefore, of learning about other cultures is to discover the ways in which other groups of human beings have organized their lives to answer the perennial questions of survival and fulfillment. Confucius said, "The nature of people is always the same; it is their habits which separate them."

Once we have a general understanding of what we can achieve through encounters with others, we can consider specifically the techniques by which our objectives are most likely to be gained. Our discussion here has been concerned more with affective rather than cognitive results although, of course, the two are integrally related. How desired modifications in a person's attitudes and perceptions are achieved and which particular materials are used will depend upon individual situations: the nature of the learner, the teacher, and the availability of educational resources. The United States education system is so diversified that it is not possible (nor desirable) to prescribe uniform techniques for achieving educational goals. Much more important is an awareness of objectives and the determination to make the methodology fit the student rather than the reverse.

The tendency in the American curriculum has been to place an unbalanced emphasis on content rather than concepts. We still talk of students "taking" certain subjects and "passing" certain subjects and "majoring in" certain subjects. The curriculum is still basically divided into subject matter units. Even if this organizational plan is retained, we can introduce a process approach to cultural studies if the teacher and student understand what they hope to achieve in learning from as well as about other cultures. If the medium is the message, the process can be the subject. Moreover, increasingly, there will be greater attention to the "student is the subject" as well as the content in which he or she is being instructed.

By learning a general technique of how to study one particular culture, it is hoped that the student can internalize the method and can use it towards understanding other cultures--within and outside one's own system--in a way similar to that used in educating anthropologists. An intensive study should help the student to develop the skill of empathy and the style of humility. Although the learner is introduced to other value systems, the result need not be a minimized view of his own culture; it will surely result, however, in an additional view not only of others but also of one's self.

Our new conditions call for new responses; likewise, new responses (really initiatives) can create new conditions. This necessity (and opportunity) makes the study of human societies essential because we all belong to cultures and need to know more about how they are created and function. We need more information and more understanding, but more than these we need new methods of learning. "Until today ideas have always lived longer than people," says psychologist Edward de Bono," but now people live longer than ideas. As a result there is a great need for mental tools."[2] He calls his method "zigzag thinking"--a mixture of vertical thinking (ideas based on experience) and

lateral thinking (ideas based on imagination). An important ingredient in zigzag thinking is humor because the mixture of ideas often provides a sudden reversal in the ways in which a situation can be perceived. As the "punch line" of a joke succeeds if it is not anticipated, so zigzag thinking often reveals insights that come from unpredictable patterns of finding.

For our purposes, cultural studies are attractive because the "shock" of cultural differences can stimulate the mind to recognize that what appears to be logical is often merely habitual. Each person tends to believe that his or her own particular perception is not personal but universal. What makes sense to each of us also seems to be just "common sense."[3]

This awareness concerning "common sense" and logic becomes now perhaps the most significant contribution which we can make to a student's education. Our mind is re-minded that how one perceives a particular condition is determined less by the condition itself and more by one's cultural conditioning. In the world of Yang-Yin, for example, men and women are assumed to have different but complementary functions; differences are not necessarily perceived as deficiencies. Similarly, Gandhi did not advocate equality; he argued in favor of equity.

For our educational purposes, cultural studies and experiences are vital and vitalizing. Travel may not as Mark Twain said, "be fatal to prejudice," but it can help to uncover assumptions if a visitor is willing to do some "other-minded" thinking. In Bali, for example, no religious service could possibly be complete without music and dance because (as any Balinese knows) gods do not reside in temples but go there and remain as long as they are entertained. What could be more logical?

To change and add to our perspectives is not as difficult as it may first seem. The ways in which we view the world, other people and ourselves are,

after all, the results of education, formal and informal. Humans are not born with conceptions; we learn them. And we can unlearn them as well.

The greatest value of cultural studies can be to help persons transcend their own cultural conditioning. For this purpose, cultural studies and experiences are a unique kind of content. It is, after all, difficult for the mind to "change its mind" because it has been so carefully encouraged to think in prescribed ways. By encountering contrasting minds--culturally different--each mind is reminded that its viewpoint is cultural rather than natural and its potential beliefs are not limited to its cultural inheritance. This kind of awareness can encourage one's confidence and ability to shape as well as receive, to create as well as adapt to changing conditions. We can all benefit from such learning because increasingly we live in new cultures--the cultures of the future which are not merely extensions of the past. We now have the opportunity (and necessity) of being culture-creators as well as culture-inheritors.

We can begin to celebrate the cultural diversity which enriches our world. We can begin to achieve the kind of education of which Marshall McLuhan writes: "Someday, all of us will spend our lives in our own school, the world. And education--in the sense of learning to love, to grow, to change--can become not the woeful preparation for some job that makes us less than we could be but the very essence, the joyful whole of existence itself."

And we can become more effective and affective. "We now live in a world," says Robert Hutchins, "where the way to stay human is to keep on learning." As a creative species we can change conditions; we can remake our territories as well as our maps. We can, with even greater frequency, "change around the furniture of our universe," as Buckminster Fuller has said.

The progress of humanity can move in two opposite (but no opposing!) directions--towards a self-culture of more individualized choices but within an identification of membership in the total human society. Unlike earlier cultures which were tradition-directed, the newer cultures can allow for more self-direction while also being concerned with safeguarding and nurturing our global culture. We owe it to ourselves and to our global neighbors to become (in the words of the Dalai Lama of Tibet) "wise selfish"--that is, to realize that it is in our own interests to have considerations for others and to celebrate our membership in the human community.

What is urgently needed is an "adstructuring" of our perspectives--ad rather than re. We can benefit from the Hindu way of thinking that allows one to add perspectives without necessarily substituting them for earlier ones. And this adstructuring need not be an "agonizing reappraisal" but a joyful one. We can be elated that our world is so rich in talents and materials. We need to affirm our confidence that we can beneficially participate in shaping our own futures. Perspectives, as well as the past, can be prologue.

How we respond to the possibilities provided by cultural studies is itself an indicator of our own educational philosophy. It can be the kind of education which Yu-kuang Chu calls, "interior orientation" in which personal inner resources are developed and strenghtened by recognizing that "it is not the environment that educates a person; it is the inner reactions of the person to the environment."[4] This is also the kind of education that Robert Pirsig brilliantly explores in his Zen and the Art of Motocycle Maintenance, which is subtitled, "An Inquiry Into Values" and alerts us that, "The real cycle you're working on is a cycle called 'yourself.'"

It is also the kind of education of which Daniel Boorstin talks, "a playful spirit, an exploring spirit...of being willing to go and look for

something you don't know of. It's the search for the unknown...that means the testing of things, seeing what is possible." It's the zest with which Margaret Mead talks of her greatest greed being "the greed for new experiences."

It is delightful and encouraging that words such as human, humility and humor are found close together in the dictionary. They need also to be found closer in life. We must appreciate more the seriousness of humor ("a changing and uncertain state of mind...incongruous") as a helpful learning style for becoming self-educating. Also, the special contribution of humility ("freedom from pride and arrogance") will receive more recongition in the curriculum where the student is the subject.

Now, when eighty minutes have replaced eighty days as the earth-circling wager, it is hazardous to base actions solely on one's own viewpoint. Moreover, ignorance about others perpetuates ignorance about one's self because it is only by comparisons that one can discover personal differences and similarities. The "glass" through which other cultures are viewed serves not only as a window; it serves also as a mirror in which each can see a reflection of his or her own way of life.

More than ever, we need to become our own teachers in a world where educated selves will be able to continue the process of self-educating. No content can serve this purpose better than cultural encounters. The discovery of "other" is also the discovery of "self"; without the combination, training is possible but not self-educating.

[1]Aldous Huxley, Jesting Pilate. London: Chatto and Widnus, Ltd., 1926.
[2]Edward de Bono, "The Virtues of Zigzag Thinking," Think Magazine, May-June, 1969, published by International Business Machines, Purchase, NY.
[3]Seymour Fersh, Learning About Peoples and Cultures. Evanston, Illinois: McDougal, Littel and Company, 1974.
[4]Yu-kuang Chu," "The Liberal Values of Non-Western Studies," Topic, A Journal of the Liberal Arts, published by Washington and Jefferson College, Washington, Pennsylvania, Spring, 1962.